

# A Rose for Emily

(1930)

William Faulkner

## Abstract:

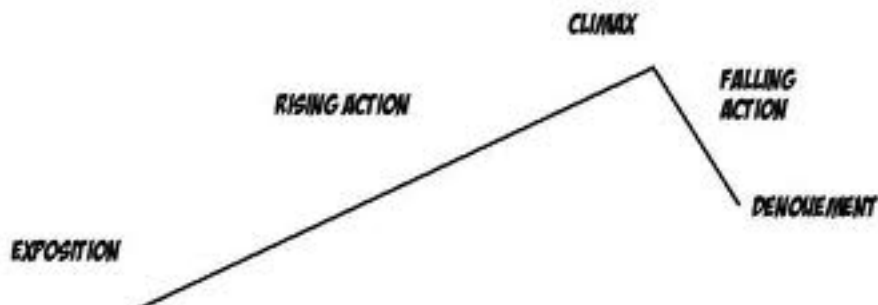
The Griersons were, at one time, a wealthy Southern family, a fact that separated them from the townspeople. Miss Emily was the youngest and last of the Griersons, isolated by her father, Colonel Sartoris, and alienated by the town in the days of post-Reconstruction. Having had few suitors, none deemed acceptable by her father before his passing, Emily only spent time with one man, Homer, despite his preference to carouse with friends and only socialized as far as entertaining visitors at her father's funeral and giving lessons to children in china-painting. Her interactions were terse, as was the case when they came to collect taxes, or hysterical, as when she tried to keep her father's body in the house, and the townspeople approached her delicately. At one point, when there was an odd smell about the house, they waited until dark to spread lime around the outside rather than face the discomfort of approaching her.

Upon her death, her servant, an African-American who rarely spoke, vacated the house immediately, without a word. Cousins came to host the funeral, a heavily attended one. The townspeople, ever-hungry to see the house Miss Emily had locked up from the world for so long, entered and explored. In a room above the stairs, the men had to force the door open as it had been shut up for many years. When the dust of their intrusion settled, the image of a bridal suite clarified, rose-colored, musty, and decaying. On the bed lay the skeleton of a man clad in pajamas; on the pillow next to his head lay a single strand of iron-gray hair in an indentation reminiscent of the resting place for one's head.



## Plot Analysis:

Faulkner chose non-linear flashback to develop the plot of "A Rose for Emily." Split into five sections, the reader jumps between flashes of Miss Emily's life backward from the "present", as though the narrator is relating a story and keeps forgetting key elements and has to fill the reader in as s/he remembers it. The conflicts of the story are both external and internal, though the internal is inferred rather than developed explicitly. Faulkner develops the external conflict through Emily, the protagonist, with her father, who isolates her because of his own expectations of superiority, and with society, who alienates her because her father has done so already and because she is female in a time when females were expected to be subservient and taken care of. The reader can infer the internal conflict that results from such isolation and alienation. The resolution to both occurs when Emily murders Homer to retain companionship and ultimately, when she dies.



**Miss Emily Grierson:** isolated, clingy, mad  
(static/round)

*Faulkner develops Emily's character through the observations of the townspeople, metaphor, imagery, symbolism, simile, and personification*

"the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house" (metaphor)

"Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town" (metaphor)

"a small, fat woman in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head. Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue. Her eyes, lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough as they moved from one face to another while the visitors stated their errand." (imagery, symbol)

"with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows—sort of tragic and serene." (metaphor)

## C H A R A C T E R S

**Narrator:** member of the town, observer, judgmental, borderline gleeful at Miss Emily's "fall from grace" (static/flat)

*Faulkner uses metaphor, imagery, condescending connotation, and simile to construct the narrator's tone.*

"We had long thought of them as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door. So when she got to be thirty and was still single, we were not pleased exactly, but vindicated; even with insanity in the family she wouldn't have turned down all of her chances if they had really materialized." (metaphor)

"The druggist looked down at her" (symbolism)

"Now and then we would see her in one of the downstairs windows—she had evidently shut up the top floor of the house—like the carved torso of an idol in a niche, looking or not looking at us, we could never tell which. Thus she passed from generation to generation—dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse." (simile)



## Point of View:

**1st person limited:** *Faulkner writes from the perspective of a townsman, as evidenced by his use of pronouns such as "we" or "our". As such, the narrator is limited in that s/he cannot experience Miss Emily's thoughts. Given the socio-economic status that initially separates the Griersons from the rest of the town, there is a bias toward the family and Miss Emily in particular given the further isolation by her father. This point of view constructs a motif of judgment as well as generational differences; by using it, Faulkner observes how the differences between generations often lead to condescension and judgment toward the older generations.*



## Motifs/Themes:

**Judgment and generational differences -**

*The differences between generations often lead to condescension and judgment toward the older generation.*

or

*Younger generations often disregard and dismiss the traditions and values of older generations.*

**Isolation -**

*Imposed isolation can greatly impact the physical and mental well-being of a person.*

or

*Most people need emotional connections and relationships to thrive.*

## Biographical Context



**William Faulkner (1897-1962)**

Born William Cuthbert Falkner - it is speculated that the change in the spelling of his last name was deliberate to look more British when he joined the Canadian Royal Army - William spent the majority of his life in the Southern United States, specifically Mississippi, which greatly influenced his writing by providing fodder for the setting to the majority of his stories and novels. Faulkner made his living as a writer, publishing short stories in local and national magazines, publishing novels and collections of poetry, and occasionally working in Hollywood as a screenwriter. Faulkner was not averse to controversy, though most of it derived from being misquoted or misunderstood in interviews. In discussing a contemporary writer, Ernest Hemingway, he questioned Hemingway's literary courage, but as it was taken out of context, it seemed he was attacking his persona directly, something he clarified in a personal letter to Hemingway. A little closer to the motifs of racial tensions in the Post-Reconstruction South in his own writing, Faulkner jumped into the fray in the battle against segregation. An opponent to it, he was wary of federal involvement in it, fearing too rapid of a change was impractical. Faulkner married his childhood sweetheart, Estelle, who brought two children from a first marriage to the union, and had a daughter. He worked to take care of his entire family, including his mother after his father's death. He was also known to have had several extra-marital affairs and partaken in multiple drinking binges requiring commitments to a sanitarium to dry out.

### Works and Awards:

Novels: *Soldier's Pay*, *Mosquitoes*, *Sartoris*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, *Requiem for a Nun*, *Intruder in the Dust*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Reivers*, *A Fable*, *The Snopes Trilogy: The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion*

Collections: *The Marble Faun* (poetry), *A Green Bough* (poetry), *The Portable Faulkner*, *Knight's Gambit* (detective stories), *Collected Stories* (short stories)

Awards: Pulitzer Prizes (*The Reivers* and *A Fable*); Nobel Prize for Literature; U.S. National Book Awards (*Collected Stories* and *A Fable*); Howells Medal

Faulkner lived and wrote in the Southern United States from the middle 1920s through the 1940s, a fact which would greatly impact his writing. He set "A Rose for Emily" in the years following the Reconstruction Era, reflecting the issues still prevalent in the world in which he lived. A time of great upheaval, Southerners were still recovering from the economic repercussions of the emancipation of the slaves as well as the new generation's disdain for the antebellum South, both of which feature prominently in "A Rose for Emily." The crumbling of a once-wealthy and respected family, the Griersons, and the borderline glee with which the newer generations in town watch this "fall from grace" illustrate the world in which Faulkner lived.

In addition to the issues specific to geography, Faulkner also reveals the racial and gender issues facing people during that time period. African-Americans, having to find their place in a world that had recently held them slaves, sought employment and often found it for poor wages under white employers. Faulkner lightly touches on this with the Grierson's African-American servant, who wisely chooses to quickly escape the madness of the house upon Emily's death. Also, given that women had not yet been granted the right to vote during the time period of the story, it is unsurprising that Emily, as an unwed woman, was limited in options after her father's death.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it" ~ William Faulkner

"When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old man-servant—a combined gardener and cook—had seen in at least ten years."

~ Faulkner's use of first person and the metaphorical monument establishes the narrative perspective as well as the lens through which the main character is viewed.

## Significant Quotations

"Now and then we would see her in one of the downstairs windows—she had evidently shut up the top floor of the house—like the carved torso of an idol in a niche, looking or not looking at us, we could never tell which. Thus she passed from generation to generation—dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse."

~ Faulkner uses this stream-of-consciousness and simile to further illustrate the distance between Emily and the town. Idols do not elevate themselves; the worshippers do the elevating. Thus, while Emily was isolated by her father, the town alienated her and raised her up in hopes of watching her fall.

"They rose when she entered—a small, fat woman in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head. Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue. Her eyes, lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough as they moved from one face to another while the visitors stated their errand."

~ Faulkner reveals Emily Grierson at the end of her life, a woman in decay, hyperbolically "vanishing" and symbolically "tarnished" like the traditions of the antebellum South. The imagery used here reveals the culminating effects of a conflict he does not reveal until later in the non-linear flashback: typically, it is believed that when coal undergoes extreme pressure, it becomes a diamond; however, Faulkner chooses an indiscernible "lump of dough" to illustrate the effects of a pressure-filled life.

In this short story, Faulkner relied heavily on stream-of-consciousness, imagery, symbolism, and metaphor to construct a condemning tone toward both the traditions of the antebellum South and the younger generation's condescension toward it.



"The violence of breaking down the door seemed to fill this room with pervading dust. A thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room decked and furnished as for a bridal: upon the valance curtains of faded rose color, upon the rose-shaded lights, upon the dressing table, upon the delicate array of crystal and the man's toilet things backed with tarnished silver, silver so tarnished that the monogram was obscured. Among them lay a collar and tie, as if they had just been removed, which, lifted, left upon the surface a pale crescent in the dust. Upon a chair hung the suit, carefully folded; beneath it the two mute shoes and the discarded socks."

~ Faulkner's use of imagery and symbolism here encapsulates the decay of Southern traditions and ideals as well as the effect that living in isolation can have on an individual. The effects of change are often "violent" and "pervading", leading to upheaval.